



PLANNING AND PREPARING FOR DIFFICULT QUESTIONS AND STATEMENTS

(Developed by Fulton Communications)

“You killed Sheila!” “You’re lying to us!” “Do you drink the water?” Responding to challenging statements or questions can be difficult, especially when you are not expecting them. Two tools that will help you to plan and prepare for this are the (1) 6-Step Structured Response Guideline and (2) Generic Categories of Questions and Statements. These tools work hand-in-hand for any issue (safety, health, environmental, fairness, economics, political, cultural or social) and with both internal and external stakeholders in any setting. These tools are not effective without hands on training in non-verbal skills.

The 6-Step structure shown below is a guideline for answering difficult questions. It is a flexible tool that can be useful when you are in the midst of a difficult and/or challenging dialogue. Remember that it is a guideline and not a model; every situation will need to be evaluated to determine which parts of the guideline are most appropriate for use.

- Step 1: Anger/Ventilation
- Step 2: What’s the question?
- Step 3: Empathy
- Step 4: Conclusion
- Step 5: Facts
- Step 6: Future Action

The first two steps in the guideline match up with the first two Generic Categories. In applying the 6-Step Structured Response Guideline, you are not always dealing with Steps 1 and 2. Stakeholders are not always venting (angry) and you usually know what the question is. Most of the time, Steps 3, 4, 5, and 6 of this guideline are all that are necessary; however, evaluate the situation to determine whether it is appropriate to skip Steps 1 and 2.

Step 1: Anger/Ventilation

Also Generic Category 1. The person is very angry or agitated. Let the person vent (up to a point) to let out his or her frustration with the situation. The time you allow for this depends on the situation and the number of people involved.

Step 2: What’s the question?

Also Generic Category 2. You’re not sure what the person is asking or stating because he or she is still venting, jumping from subject to subject, or not clear. Listen carefully to what the person is saying and paraphrase the question or use one of his or her key words to learn more.



Step 3: Empathy

Sometimes it is appropriate indicate to your stakeholders that you have some sense of what they are saying and/or some sense of their situation. Empathy is comprehending their ideas, situations, and feelings from their perspective – walking in their shoes. Empathy is not sympathy and empathy is not agreement. Empathy is not “I know how you feel” because you don’t know how they feel; only they know how they feel.

Empathy is your ability to figure out the following: What must their situation be like for them? To do this, you must think about them, not yourself. Do not bring in your personal feelings or beliefs. Empathy cannot be artificial; it must be genuine. You cannot pretend to be empathic to their situation because stakeholders can tell if you are insincere.

Major traps in empathy statements are using personal connections that are not relevant to the listener and giving statements that are not genuine – both in the words and the tone.

Personal connections can be made in an empathy statement only if the connection is direct and solid. Examples of effective direct empathy statements would be, “I live in your community, too,” “My family drinks that water,” or “I’ve taken the vaccine.” Conversely, “I work next to your community,” “I would drink that water if I lived here,” or “I would take that vaccine” would most likely not be effective empathy statements.

Empathetic statements are not always necessary. They are most helpful when dealing with anger, fear, crises, distrust, and significant concerns. Empathy statements, if used, should be stated before Step 4: Conclusion, Step 5: Facts, and Step 6: Future Action.

Step 4: Conclusion

The conclusion is usually the most difficult step in the 6-Step Structured Response Guideline. It must be short, simple, and precede the facts that support the conclusion. The conclusion should address the underlying point of the question or statement. If you don’t know the underlying point, you are back at Step 2, so you won’t have a conclusion yet.

Examples of good conclusion statements are:

- “The water is safe to drink.”
- “The vaccine is safe and effective.”
- “I don’t know, but I’ll find out.”
- “We’ve been sharing all the information with you about ‘X’.”
- “We are doing a lot.”
- “We don’t plan further clean up.”
- “We could have done better back then.”
- “The food is safe to eat.”
- “The policy states that ...”



- “We can not provide that to you.”
- “We can provide that to you.”
- “I have bad news to deliver.”
- “You are okay.”
- “You have cancer.”
- “One thing that has to happen first is...”
- “The clean up is complete.”

Major traps in the conclusion portion are:

- The conclusion statement doesn’t address the underlying point.
- The conclusion statement is too long.
- Facts are included in the conclusion, e.g., “The water is safe to drink because...”
The facts are delivered separately in Step 5.

Step 5: Facts

Facts support your conclusion. There is no right number of facts to give to stakeholders. In some instances, you may only have one fact. Other times, you may have several facts and your stakeholders are interested in all of them. In those cases, use all your facts.

As you are speaking, determine whether your stakeholders are listening to you. If not, stop talking about your facts and find out why they aren’t listening.*

Major traps in the fact portion are:

- Over use of negative words and phrases
- The use of what would be considered jargon for the stakeholders
- Not observing if the stakeholders are listening

Step 6: Future Action

You may not always have or need a future action in your verbal response. There are many instances where you close/complete the response without a future action. However, it is important to have a future action when the stakeholders are concerned, fearful, distrustful, worried, confused, or misperceiving the facts.

Future action statements should have a “when” or timing factor. If you don’t have a “when,” provide an “I will get back to you” with more specifics about what is next, i.e., a “when” you’ll have a “when.” Whatever your future action comment is, it should let the stakeholders know that they will continue to be involved unless, of course, their point/issue has been resolved.

Good future action statements are:

- “I don’t know, but I’ll call you tomorrow.”
- “I don’t know, but I’ll let you know at the meeting next Tuesday.”
- “I’ll be happy to talk to you more after the meeting.”
- “There’s more information about this on our website/brochure/fact sheet.”



- “The next review will be held at ‘X’ on ‘Y’ day.”
- “We won’t know for at least 6 months, but I’ll be glad to call/email once a month on our latest outlook.”

Caveats to the 6-Step Guideline:

- This is a guideline, not a model.
- You may not have conclusion/facts, just a future action.
- Use transition statements between steps.*
- The guideline is not for media communications; how one manages the media is different.
- None of this is effective without hands-on, non-verbal skills.*

GENERIC CATEGORIES OF QUESTIONS AND STATEMENTS

Most questions and statements in difficult communications settings generally fall in one of the following generic categories:

1. Ventilation – A Highly Negative Emotional State/Anger
2. What’s the Question or Statement?
3. Rude But Briefly Acceptable
4. Negative Allegations – Not True
5. Negative Allegations – True
6. Guarantee/100% Assurance/No Risk Acceptable
7. Fairness Questions
8. The Set Up Question or Statement
9. Personal Interest That’s Not Relevant (in group discussions)
10. Policy
11. Factual Questions – Who? What? When? Where?
12. You Don’t Know

Use the following table and the 6-Step Structured Response Guideline to help you formulate your responses to difficult questions and statements.

* For more information, come to a USACHPPM Introductory Risk Communication workshop. You may also call USACHPPM’s Health Risk Communication Program at 410-436-3515 for assistance with specific issues.



GENERIC CATEGORIES OF QUESTIONS AND STATEMENTS

CATEGORY NUMBER	CATEGORY TYPE	EXAMPLES	YOUR GOAL	MAJOR TRAPS	GENERIC NATURE OF RESPONSE*	RELEVANT STEPS IN 6-STEP GUIDELINE
1	Ventilation – A Highly Negative Emotional State/Anger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “You killed my friend!” ▪ “I have cancer because of you!” ▪ “You don’t care!” 	Get them to calm down enough to discuss the facts behind their anger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Responding too early with factual information ▪ Taking their comments personally ▪ Inadequate non-verbal observation skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Let them vent ▪ Stay with empathy for awhile ▪ When they have calmed down somewhat (based on non-verbal observation), use open ended questions ▪ Move to facts if they appear to be ready to discuss facts 	Step 1: Anger/Ventilation
2	What’s the Question or Statement?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Incoherent language ▪ Talking in circles 	Address the underlying concern/issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assuming you know the question or statement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Paraphrase off of recent questions or ▪ A softball push back statement 	Step 2: What’s the question or statement?
3	Rude But Briefly Acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “You’re an idiot.” ▪ “Are you a REAL doctor/nurse/engineer?” ▪ “Where’d you get your birth certificate?” 	Get them to explain what’s behind their rudeness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Taking it personally ▪ Not recognizing the interface between the 5 Emotional Levels* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Acknowledge that they are upset ▪ How long you allow the rudeness to continue will depend on the situation 	Step 3: Empathy
4	Negative Allegations – Not True	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Why are you lying about ...?” ▪ “You’re covering up.” 	Convince them of the truth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pushing back and reinforcing the negative allegation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Emphasize the positive reversal 	Step 3: Empathy Step 4: Conclusion Step 5: Facts Step 6: Future Action
5	Negative Allegations - True	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Why are you lying about ...?” ▪ “You’re covering up.” 	To demonstrate openness and honesty.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Defensiveness or denial when the allegation is true ▪ Not getting approval for your response ahead of time from the Command, Legal and Public Affairs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Acknowledge the truth ▪ Emphasize the commitment to corrective action – past, present and future 	Step 3: Empathy Step 4: Conclusion Step 5: Facts Step 6: Future Action



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6	Guarantee/100% Assurance/No Risk Acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Promise me this will never happen again.” ▪ “Can you guarantee me that ...?” ▪ “Isn’t it better to be safe than sorry?” 	Provide assurance that the risk concern is being managed well	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Saying yes, no, or maybe ▪ Not recognizing the “numerator perception” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Emphasize the commitment ▪ What you are doing 	Step 3: Empathy Step 4: Conclusion Step 5: Facts Step 6: Future Action
7	Fairness Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Do you think it’s fair that I have to drink this water?” ▪ “I don’t think it’s right that I have to do ‘X’ because of you.” 	Search for common ground. If no common ground move to “Policy” category	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Evasive or defensive ▪ Cost/Benefit discussions ▪ Not always being aware of common ground opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Empathize ▪ Be open about your plans, even if the news is bad for them ▪ Be willing to pursue their point if there may be common ground 	Step 3: Empathy Step 4: Conclusion Step 5: Facts Step 6: Future Action
8	The Set Up Question or Statement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Where do you live?” ▪ “Have you taken the vaccine?” ▪ “How would you like it if you had to work in this building filled with asbestos?” 	To have them move from the set up to their underlying issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Trying to avoid the set up ▪ Not recognizing what the underlying issue is 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide the information they request in the set up and go to the underlying issue ▪ Keep your response brief 	Step 3: Empathy
9	Personal Interest That’s Not Relevant (in group discussions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A question or statement about issue “X” when the discussion/meeting is about issue “Y”. 	Get back to the relevant subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Getting into the non-relevant discussion ▪ Rudely/abruptly telling them their question is inappropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Soft ball push back ▪ Bridge back to relevant subject followed by expressing willingness to discuss the other issue later or sending them to another source 	Step 3: Empathy Step 4: Conclusion Step 5: Facts Step 6: Future Action



CATEGORY NUMBER	CATEGORY TYPE	EXAMPLES	YOUR GOAL	MAJOR TRAPS	GENERIC NATURE OF RESPONSE*	RELEVANT STEPS IN 6-STEP GUIDELINE
10	Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Are there gays in the Army?” ▪ “I don’t want to take the vaccine.” ▪ “Does this mean my spouse is having an affair?” (STD Policy Questions) ▪ “I think I deserve ...” 	Clarify the policy if necessary and have them focus on the policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Talking too much about their situation and possibly misleading them in terms of policy options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Express empathy (sometimes) ▪ Clear statement of the policy as your conclusion statement ▪ Step 5 (Facts) should include commitment of those involved 	Step 3: Empathy Step 4: Conclusion Step 5: Facts
11	Factual Questions – What? Who? When? Where?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “When is the next meeting?” ▪ “What are the next steps?” ▪ “When will you find out the results of the testing?” 	Answer the questions clearly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Jargon ▪ Talking too long 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Respond in language understandable to the stakeholder ▪ Know when to stop talking – non-verbal observation skills 	Step 4: Conclusion Step 5: Facts
12	You Don’t Know the Answer to a Good, Appropriate Question	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Any question in Category 11 	Openly acknowledge you don’t have the information but will get it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Unwilling to admit you don’t know the answer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide a “when” you will get the information to them 	Step 4: Conclusion Step 6: Future Action

*For specific examples, come to a USACHPPM Introductory Risk Communication workshop where we can discuss your work related issues. You may also call USACHPPM's Health Risk Communication Program at 410-436-3515 for assistance with specific issues.